

# Diet Soda Market Adding Exotic Flavors

BY SUSAN CARPENTER  
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It's been 60 years since diet soda first burst on the scene with a sugar-free ginger ale known as No-Cal that catered to diabetics. Then came RC Cola's Diet Rite, followed by Tab, Fresca and a slew of sugar-free versions of Pepsi and Coca-Cola that seem to be in perpetual states of reformulation to accommodate customers' fickle tastes.

Today, it isn't just colas that are going on a diet. The market for no-calorie sodas has become as effervescent as the beverages themselves, with an ever-expanding palette of exotic flavors such as coconut, pomegranate and coffee — many of them from small companies that are developing loyal followings catering to customers' thirst for carbonated indulgence without the sugar.

"We'd all love to drive a Ferrari if it had the fuel consumption of a Prius, but you can't have it all. What we've found with our product is that it gets the fuel consumption of a Prius and maybe drives like a BMW," said Paddy Spence, chief executive of Zevia, a brand of stevia-sweetened sodas based in Culver City, Calif., that is sold locally at Ralphs and Albertsons supermarkets and, later this fall, will be available at Vons and Target.

Zevia is one of the only carbonated drink companies to use the natural, no-calorie sweetener derived from the leaves of the Stevia rebaudiana plant, which is generally recognized as safe by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for use as a sweetener in foods. Stevia is more commonly used in non-carbonated beverages, such as Sobe Life Water and Vitamin Water.

Most diet sodas are artificially sweetened with aspartame (better known as Equal), acesulfame potassium (also known as Ace-K) or sucralose (branded as Splenda) — sometimes in combination. All of them are artificial sweeteners produced using chemical processes that are regulated by the FDA as food additives. All of them offer more concentrated levels of sweetness than ordinary table sugar without the calories.

The FDA has approved the use of five artificial sweeteners as food additives, including aspartame, Ace-K and sucralose, as well as saccharin and neotame (better known as NutraSweet). Before each sweetener came to market, the FDA determined they were safe "well within acceptable daily intake levels," said FDA spokeswoman Carla Daniels.

While some studies have shown that repeated exposure to low- and no-calorie sweeteners may lead to the development of preferences for sweet foods and beverages and high-calorie foods, and eventually lead to health complications associated with such a diet, that hasn't slowed the market.

Diet soda is a rare sweet spot in the carbonated soft-drink business. Sales of soda overall have been declining in the U.S. since 2005 as consumers migrate to other types of bottled drinks, such as water and tea. In 2000, diet sodas made up 24.7 percent of the crowded \$76 billion carbonated beverage market in the U.S. Driven by consumers' demand for sweet drinks without the weight gain and tooth decay associated with 160-calories-per-can sugar versions, diet sodas now make up 29.1 percent of sales, according to John Sicher, editor and publisher of Beverage Digest in Medford Hills, N.Y.

Galco's Soda Pop Stop in L.A.'s Highland Park neighborhood carries almost two dozen types of diet soda, such as Fizz's of St. Louis, Boylan's of New Jersey and Hank's of Trevose, Pa., as well as Lorina from France and Squamscot from New Hampshire. Among the flavors he carries are diet sodas in grape, chai and vanilla, as well as more traditional flavors, such as cola and citrus.

"People want to taste something different, and that's what we're about," said John Nese, owner of Galco's for 15 years. "Some of those people want zero calories."

## TASTE TESTING DIET SODAS

With the variety of chic diet sodas expanding faster than the contents of a CO<sub>2</sub> canister, we asked a few *Times* staffers to sample a dozen brands in a wide variety of flavors, such as cola, grape soda and root beer. Here are their thoroughly unscientific reviews.

## CLEAR WINNERS:

Cascade Ice Acai Blueberry Pomegranate (sweetened with sucralose)  
"I enjoy this as a less sugary option to fruit juice. It's light but still has the berry taste."  
Hank's Diet Root Beer (sweetened with aspartame)

"Good root beer flavor but lighter."

Jones Zero Calorie Vanilla Bean Soda (sucralose)  
"Doesn't taste too sweet. Very nice vanilla flavor."  
Lorina Sparkling Lemonade (sucralose)  
"I could drink this all day."  
Squamscot Diet Grape (sucralose)  
"Yum! Doesn't taste like diet."

**POLARIZING:**  
Boylan's (sucralose and Ace-K)  
"Bad flavor, extra sweet fin-

ish." "Sweeter than Diet Coke with a genuine cola flavor."

Dr. Brown's Diet Cream Soda (aspartame)  
"All sweet, no flavor." "Wow. Love it."  
Fizz's Diet Cream Soda (sucralose and Ace-K)  
"Strong vanilla flavor, a little too sweet." "Tastes like vanilla ice cream."

Zevia Mountain Zevia (stevia)  
"Too sweet."  
**LESS THAN LOVED:**  
Blenheim Ginger Ale (aspartame)

"The ginger is so strong that it burns."

Manhattan Special Espresso Coffee Soda (aspartame)  
"Tastes like carbonated burnt coffee. Very bitter but too sweet at the same time."  
Taylor's Tonics Chai Cola Light (Erythritol)  
"Exotic in a bad way."



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The soda market has been losing ground to sports drinks and vitamin waters in recent years with one exception: diet sodas.

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